THE TRUE UNITY OF THE CHURCH.

A

DISCOURSE

PREACHED IN THE

CHURCH OF THE SECOND PARISH, WORCESTER,

FEBRUARY 10, 1869.

BY NATHANIEL HALL.

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ON OCCASION OF THE INSTALLATION OF

REV. EDWARD H. HALL,

AS ACTIVE PASTOR OF SAID PARISH,

BY NATHANIEL HALL.

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Rev. Joseph Allen,
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ORDER OF SERVICES

AT THE

INSTALLATION OF REV. EDWARD H. HALL,

AS ACTIVE PASTOR OF THE SECOND PARISH IN WORCESTER.

February 10, 1869, at 11 A. M.

VOLUNTARY.

ANTHEM.

Introductory Prayer and Reading of the Scriptures by the Rev. A. M. KNAPP, of Providence.

HYMN.

Sermon by the Rev. N. HALL, of Dorchester.

ORIGINAL HYMN.

Lord! beneath whose equal hand,
Present, Past, and Future stand,
Hear us offer grateful praise
For Thy gifts in by-gone days,
Gifts of gain and gifts of loss,
Boon of crown, and boon of cross,
Blessings from our angels fled,
Living works from hands long dead,

Children of the Present, we
Dare not meet it without Thee,
In this vivid, stern To-day
Nerve our work and hear us pray.
Help us keep no peace with sin,
Calm us by Thy peace within,
Shield us from the day's fierce light,
Shine throughout the darksome night.

For our Future, best shall be
That which seemeth best to Thee!
Take our starting hopes and fears,
Giver of our changing years!
We would make nor prayer nor moan,
Thou art wise and Thou alone,
Father, in whose loving hand
Present, Past, and Future stand.

H. W. H.

Prayer of Installation by Rev. Dr. ALONZO HILL, the Senior Pastor.

Right Hand of Fellowship by Rev. R. R. SHIPPEN, of Worcester.

Concluding Prayer by Rev. Dr. JOSEPH ALLEN, of Northborough.

ANTHEM.

Benediction by Rev. EDWARD H. HALL, the Pastor.

SERMON.

Acts iv: 32. "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul."

How much is told, in this single stroke of the historic limner, of the infant Church! Only a line—and yet how luminous, beneath our thought, with a meaning as attractive as its fact is singular! It was a multitude—that infant Church—numbering thousands, representing many and diverse peoples and tribes—their widely-separating localities outmeasured by estranging prejudices—and yet it was of one heart and of one soul. A common sentiment of brotherhood and good-will was the breath of its being, and toned all differences to harmony. Differences of course there must have been in their relation as believers; as to the precise import of much of the Master's teachings, echoed from Apostles' lips or borne in memory from his own; differences at least in the measure of their apprehension of them. But it weakened not the bond of a loving fellowship. Their bond of fellowship with *him* was too strong for that. Enough that they knew him—by a vision more penetrative than the understanding's, by an appreciation which only the heart has competency for—and could interpret his teachings by himself. Differences of condition we know there were. Rich and poor, learned and illiterate, high-born and low-born, were among them. But these too were lost sight of in the fact of a common discipleship and a common faith; in the thought of him who knew none of the world's distinctions in his regard for others, who took all alike into his fraternal embrace. What was all that difference to

that which united them! What all inequalities of outward lot, equals as they were in spiritual privileges and immortal hopes; equals, all, beneath the eye and in the heart of an ascended Lord!

That this unity of the early Church was no mere nominal and superficial one—had reality, had strength, is borne signal witness to in what its historian proceeds to relate of it,—namely, that "none said that aught of the things he possessed was his own, for they had all things common; and as many as were possessed of lands or houses sold them and brought the price and laid it down at the Apostles' feet, and distribution was made to every one according to his need." Signal witness, I said. For the unity that stands the strain of conflicting pecuniary self-interest, of the inherent greed of possession, has proved as by naught else it could its reality and strength; that which only some holy principle, some divine affection, can supply. The various schemes by which the world's "wise and prudent" have sought to realize a condition of things like this, have failed, less from any constructional deficiency, or economic, than from an absence of such principle and affection—of a something, as their central life, which could subdue to itself the natural selfishness.

Looking back through the centuries which separate us from that earliest life-throe of embodied Christianity, where do we find so beautiful an exhibition of its essential spirit, so signal a triumph over the defiant tendencies of self-love? Or—not to seem to do injustice to the manifested power of our Religion, which has wrought like triumphs from the beginning in individual hearts and is working them—bless God!—to-day no less than ever before—*this* only I would ask—where, since that earliest day, does history shew us the *Church*, as such, the community of Christian believers, binding in its diversities even of opinion—to say nothing of any others—by the bond of fraternal fellowship and mutual regard? It was not, indeed, to have been expected that that state of perfect harmony and oneness should continue, as

the Church widened its bounds and gathered to itself converts from yet greater varieties of race and sphere and culture, and especially as motives less pure and spiritual came into action in drawing men to it. Nor was it to have been expected, nor was it possible, that that community of possession should continue; at war as it is with Providential laws and tendencies by which the race is educated and advanced. But it *was* to have been expected—surely in all consistency—that they who placed themselves confessedly beneath that loving and love-commanding Leader, whatever differences there might be among them as regards the letter of his teachings, would remember what their spirit was, and feel towards each other as brethren, in all tolerance and charity and good-will. Very soon, as we know, was it otherwise. Before the Apostles were laid to rest from the agonies of martyrdom, strifes and dissensions had rent the Church. And so it has continued to be, and to-day is. The Church, as history presents it, who would believe the outgrowth of that bud, its unfurling tints prophetic of a world-uniting fruitage? who would believe the ongrowth of that infancy, reflecting, as we have seen, the very love of heaven?

A uniformity of belief is not possible, if desirable. In the fact that minds are individual in their original structure and tendency and endowment; in the fact of differences of culture and association, of spiritual insight and capacity; in the fact, as a universal experience, that early religious biases and prepossessions linger, with modifying influence, through the earthly lifetime—there will ever be differences of speculative belief, differences of predilection with regard to much pertaining to the externals of religion; differences directly ascribable to the Infinite Former of human minds, the Providential Ordainer of human lots—Him, whose love of variety elsewhere manifest is no less so in the endowments and capacities and susceptibilities of men; Him, who, though we dare not affirm He ordains it, *permits* a corresponding variety in the means individually possessed of culture

and development; Him, who has made His revelations of truth to the reason and moral consciousness—not independent of these, but in conjunction with them; not to constrain the soul by their overpowering effulgence, but to light up the inner sanctuary of its own divinity and reflect itself there; whose revelation in Christianity is no exception to this—as in the nature of things it could not be—*its* blessed light shining but for those who will come to it with mind and heart set open to its beams; a light quickening in receptive hearts the latent affinities which proclaim to consciousness that they are *children* of the light, yea, of the "Father of Lights." Uniformity of belief, it was intimated, if possible, were not desirable. We may not be prepared to say just this, inasmuch as Truth is one and singular, and all Error must needs be a shadow upon its effective brightness. But this may be said, that the necessity—as necessity it is in the present state of human development—of seeing, individually, less than Truth's absolute wholeness, may be made available with each for a nearer approximation to that wholeness. Each class of believers separating itself from the rest by distinctive points of belief, may be viewed as simply exaggerating in them what others fail to do justice to; as bringing into prominence a phase of the many-sided truth, which others, by nature or training, are disposed to slight—taking it, as it were, into its especial keeping, holding it aloft and demanding for it due consideration. The view, I know, is to be taken with qualification, and much allowance for the perverted tendencies of theological controversy. And, certainly, its acceptance should never preclude a stoutness of challenge to whatever in such controversy presents itself as truth; a demand for other evidence than that it has been received, no matter by what numbers, or from what antiquity, or in what imposing connections. Still the assumption is a reasonable one, that what has gained a wide and prolonged acceptance, been embodied in solemn formulas, and repeated in reverent confession by the lips of believing generations, must have an underlying truth, vital

and essential. The error and evil are in the assumption, immense and preposterous, by each section of the Church, that its creed is a full and complete expression of the truths of Christianity; the sum and substance of all revelation; a compressed statement of Law, Prophets and Gospel, by some process that excluded possibility of deficiency or redundancy, in which human imperfection and fallibility had no participation. Clearly, the cause of Truth, as well as Charity, is made to suffer by a position like this, in any measure like it. The attitude of antagonism and hostility which the sects assume towards each other is as foolish in policy as it is unworthy in spirit; if the policy be anything better than the contemptible one of building themselves up as sects. Theology, as a science—noblest of all—has advanced comparatively so little, because of this practical assumption of infallibility; this claim of each self-partitioned section of the Church to be, exclusively or by eminence, *the* Church, sole or chief depository of saving truth; declining, therefore, to avail itself, in a spirit of sympathy and candor, of others' investigations and conclusions, of contributions from whatever source to the common treasury of religious thought and knowledge—not only from within the Christian fold, but wherever the Spirit, "blowing where it listeth," has borne to any soul, of any age, an accent of the Eternal Word. Thus, with most of the institutions of theological instruction, to-day—those who instruct in them are held, I believe, by verbal avowal, annually renewed, to a definite statement of doctrine, from which no results of studious research and no deepening of spiritual insight must be allowed to move them. And apart from any such express requirement, there are influences tending to limit the instructor's efforts to a vindication of accepted views, rather than to encourage a liberality of inquiry which might lead to their modification; influences these which are felt outside of institutions, everywhere. What other science has received the treatment, and at the hands of its friends, that Theology has?—constrained within limits fixed for all time; expressed in pro-

positions regarded as exhaustive of the subject-matter of them, as finalities, to swerve from which, to question which, were condemnable heresy. It was so, once, in other realms of knowledge; but the error thus sought to be consecrated became too palpably such to be endured, and minds, in a native love of truth and freedom, broke from the unworthy thrall, enduring persecution as the cost; and for one to defend at the present day, in *these* connections, the ancient position, as against the utmost freedom of investigation and avowal, would be simply to subject himself to universal derision. Why should that position be retained—as, virtually, to so great a degree it is—in regard to this sublimest of the realms of truth? Its relations and themes may well beget a holy reverence in the inquirer's breast, may well restrain from lightly-assumed conclusions oppugnant to prevailing beliefs;—but to seek to bar enquiry in this connection and to bar dissent, implies a distrust of truth, of man, of God; is to war against the highest interests of humanity. And this *is* done, in attempt, when individuals, or classes of believers, are denied by others, on the ground of speculative differences, a fraternal sympathy and good will as fellow-believers, a hearty "God-speed" as fellow-seekers of the absolute Truth, having a common interest with themselves in possessing it, a common obligation to endeavor after it, a common duty to report and confess that of it—all and only—whereon their convictions fix.

"The word of God is not bound," said one, who had known the bondage of letter and ritual too recently and too abasingly to continue to endure it himself, or to allow others to endure it without his indignant protest. Referring to the bonds that were binding him bodily, for his bold averment of the newly-revealed truth, he exclaims rejoicingly, "but the *Word of God* is not bound." No. Its advocates may be—as its noblest was in him—but not itself. God has other media than human lips by which to speak it—though them He honors by such use, and His Gospel needs them. He speaks it directly to the waiting soul—waiting in inward

stillness and up-looking desire. He is His own Messiah to the Bethlehem of the lowly heart; and His revealings there the sages of a traditional theology may well leave its formulated wisdom, and travel far, to find. (Bless God, no less, for the Messiah, cradled in flesh, of that Judean Bethlehem, through whom the heart is prepared, as without him it had not been, for that directer speech.) "The Word of God is not bound," as not to any organs, or places, or times, so not to any statements framed in human language, any propositions of verbal definiteness. It cannot—the living Word of God—be included in them, be confined in them. It is greater than the Letter. It is larger than the Creed. It is older than Tradition. It is holier than Churches. It swells beyond the limitations of systems and schools and philosophies and theologies, and broadens into the infinite.

The Church has sought its unity in dogmatic agreement rather than in religious sympathy. It can never find it there. It *has* never found it there. Much less can it now and in the time to come. If ever it could, it was in times of popular ignorance and mental stagnation and priestly rule; times—thank God!—which, as the Past has known them, shall never return; condition from which each after age shall more and more difference itself, and so must do, by a law of human progress as resistless as the law of gravitation. It is of the world's advancing intelligence that has come this multiplication of beliefs; developing more fully that natural tendency in man—too strong to have been ever wholly repressed, never sought to be but at loss to the interests of truth and the soul—to individual thought and conclusion in religious matters. And whatever of evil, incidental and temporary, may come of this, should be willingly accepted, as of small account against the priceless and enduring good; may be turned *itself* to good, if in no other way, in the demand it makes for tolerance and charity, and in leading the multitude of believers the more to emphasize those points of agreement, which by their solemn and glorious greatness cast into shadow and insignificance all points of difference;—

while that time is looked for—afar but sure—when the uncontroverted truth, seen in its mighty largeness and all-outweighing worth, shall be universally felt as ground and persuasion for mutual regard and co-operating endeavor.

Alas, that the vision of that coming time should be so mocked by the facts of the Present! the intolerance, the exclusiveness, the ill-will, the unsanctified strife, the petty ambitions, which the Church, as such, exhibits. Alas, that this foremost agency of Christianity for the advancement of its blessed ends, should be thus crippled in its power; should be a cause of offence and stumbling and unbelief; should repel, rather than attract to itself, an outlying world, by its own worldliness of temper and of life! If it would but be true to its committed trust,—the great, absolute, living, life-giving truths of the Gospel; stand unitedly upon and for them, and make combined application of them to the follies and evils, the sins and woes, around it and within; if it would but regard truth in the heart, the will, the life, as infinitely more and greater than truth in the intellect, abiding fruitlessly there—truth held in unrighteousness as the prime heresy, the crying infidelity; if the time and energy employed in controversy about dogmas and rites—the "mint, annise and cummin" of Christianity, nothing to do with its essential self, were employed, in a consecrated earnestness, to a presentation of its "weightier matters," its eternal principles, its living Christ,—*him*, as "the truth, the way, the life"—Saviour, by no mystical process, no divine diplomacy whereby Heaven's justice and its mercy—eternally identical—had reconcilement, but by an inward likeness, a spiritual sympathy, a practical discipleship; if *this* might but be,—what a new day for humanity! what a new coming of Christ! what rejoicing among the angels? what an advance towards the fulfillment of their Advent song!

And shall this not be? It is to ask,—shall Christianity not be actualized in its nominal domain? Shall it never come in sovereign reality to its inscribed temple? Shall the Christian Church not be christianized? The signs that affirm

it—affirm, as an approaching result, a true unity of the Church, were never so many, so various, so assuring as now. More and more the walls of sectarian division are losing in altitude and power. More and more, looking over them, it is seen that the theologian's report of what is there needs modifying by the fact, that the phraseology employed to express it covers something very different from its former significance, something broader, more comprehensive, more at one with the universal reason and the moral consciousness,—the primal and all-testing revelation within the soul. More and more, looking over those barrier-walls, it is seen, that in connection with reputed heresy, are works as Christian, is a spirit as Christ-like, as are found in folds accounted free from its contaminations,—works, a spirit, answering to the test which the Master himself proposed of an accepted discipleship. More and more is there a disposition to respect this test, to regard it as the essential and conclusive one. Nor are those barrier-walls lowered only to reveal among differences of speculative belief a sameness of spiritual fruitage; but also to effect more and more a joining of activities for common ends; increasing thus mutual sympathy and regard, and multiplying the recognitions of an essential oneness. The Moral Reforms of our day—bless God for them!—have done more and other than they proposed; have borne fruits holier and sweeter than their rough exteriors gave promise of. That Voice in the moral desert demanding righteousness, heralded and led in the Christ of Charity. It was a truer appreciation of moral evil, of a sordid and cruel worldliness pursuing its ends over the bodies and souls of men; a perception of *this* as the real Anti-Christ, the supreme heresy, the concreted Satan, which begat a willingness to hold in truce, for the time, sectarian enmities, in league against the common foe; while of this league of hands was born the closer tie, going far to make that truce, at least with those concerned, an abiding one. Eminently was such result effected through our war. Among the rich compensations for its awful costs, this surely may

be named,—that, of that fellowship of labor into which all were drawn, in the exigency of events, through their humane and patriotic sympathies, there came a truer knowledge of each other hearts and motives, and thence a putting aside of sectarian prejudices and hostilities, in very shame at having cherished them. And, especially, with those united in arms;—how, before the divinity of self-sacrifice for a Cause, a Principle, an Idea, exhibited irrespectively of religious connections and beliefs, were religious connections and beliefs unthought of, or only with self-rebuke for prejudices and hostilities cherished on the ground of them!—and how, brought face to face with these grim realities, was the soul thrown back on the realities of Faith, to find that the substantial footing, after all, was on the plain, indisputable affirmations of a common Christianity! Listening together to religious services from which dogmatic peculiarities were excluded, through a lessened care for them, the old care returned not when ecclesiastical positions were reassumed. Joining in familiar hymns, which, whatever they express to the critical intellect, have but one meaning for sentiment and heart, sectarian discordances were sung to sleep. May we not foresee in all this one of the great processes by which the Heavenly Providence, ever evolving good from evil, shall effect a true unity of the Church?—the wretchedness and debasement more and more revealing itself in the midst of our Christian civilization, raising new and deeper questionings of the Church's fidelity in the Past, and causing all else to be subordinate, in thought and purpose, to the work of moral regeneration; which work a practical and unsectarian Christianity can alone accomplish.

That the religious aspects of the age furnish signs of an opposite pointing—of a growing material divergence among the different bodies of believers, must needs be allowed. The Church was never, perhaps, so divided and rent by controversies, touching issues most fundamental, as well as other; opposing extremes of tendency becoming more extreme in their respective directions, while between is every degree of

mental and sympathetic approximation to the one or the other. But may not all this have a deeper than its superficial significance? May it not be transitional to something far different from what appears? Is not its truest explanation—a recoil, on the one side, in fear, from witnessed tendencies to disbelief, and on the other, in disgust, from a conservatism that anchors itself in the Past? and—deeper and broader—a discontent with what the Church is in itself, and with what it is doing for its children and the world; a dimly-defined, but increasingly appealing want, which it fails to satisfy; a desire to lay hold on something that is not afloat in this yeast of controversy, to find footing on something more stable and rock-like than changeful dogma; an unrest of Faith, a demand for Reality. And can any one believe that in an age like this, of quickened and untrammeled thought, of large and more general culture, whose cry is for light, whose impulse is progress, men are to find rest in the direction either of a metaphysical theology or an unchristianized philosophy, of an arrogating sacerdotalism or an unreverent skepticism? are to find it *anywhere* but *within?*—through that witness which the soul bears to its Living Source; that word—nearest of all, divinest of all, so felt in man's inmost deeps to be,—God's presence there, answering to that presence as seen in Jesus, and which it was the dearest object of his mission to be the medium of revealing—not in himself alone, but through himself, in each believing soul, quickening and vitalizing it, and making it receptive, even as himself, of the Divine inspiration? Are men to find it anywhere—faith's rock-like base—save as they test the promise, uttered ages ago, uttered to-day from celestial heights, "whoso heareth these sayings of mine and *doeth* them, *he* shall find it"—where the rains and winds of controversy shall have no power to shake?

Amidst all these divisions and antagonisms, is not the popular heart of Christendom in growing sympathy with views which make life and not belief, spirit and not rite, religion and not theology, the essential thing;—and so the

sufficient ground and condition of fellowship? Amidst all this controversy *about* Christ, is there not a growing agreement *in* him? a growing disposition to see him in his Divine Humanity—inspiration and incentive to our own—rather than in those official aspects which, whatever their truth, serve, as presented in dogma, to lessen the touching effectiveness of the former view, and put him farther from our sympathies and aspirings; a growing disposition to find his religion in *himself*—not in his words merely, nor his acts, but in the spirit that animated and vitalized them;—which when men shall come to do, they will have precluded cause for controversy about his religion, as they will have lost heart for it.

Towards this unifying result our own religious body is an important, if not a leading, influence. Let it be true to its principles and call, and with nothing of fear or misgiving, but with a trustful boldness, follow where they lead! Let it not think to furl, by a single fold, the banner providentially given it to bear, inscribed with that glorious trinity of immortal forces,—"Holiness, Liberty, Love"; nor allow that middle term to be less commanding than the rest! Let toleration have with us the dignity of a principle; no mere impulse, controlled by our prejudices or our fears! And let it be a principle broad enough—as consistently it must—for the embrace in our fellowship of all who are seeking God's truth in a reverent love of it, and bearing its blessed fruits. Let it be no less broad than Christ's was; who recognized such as his, though outwardly they walked not with him; to whom it was enough that they *were* with him, though they knew it not; enough that they did the will of his Father in Heaven—*so* were they nearer to him than "brother or sister or mother"! Let us not withhold our fellowship to any who, in his spirit, are doing his work, though they feel not as we do, or cannot in the same terms express, their obligations to him as the personal Christ. Obligations which no less exist. For, that all which is highest and purest and loveliest in them they owe to God through *Christ*, is as certain as that they have been nourished from

infancy on the "Bread from Heaven" that he is, have been enclosed and swathed by the influences of his religion as by an atmosphere.

Why fear for Truth? Why doubt that its destiny is to triumph and to reign?—the Truth as it is in Jesus—God's seal upon it, which he shews to each accepting soul through its own immortal affinities therewith; Truth, the signatures of whose divineness the soul that but contemplates it, as seen in Jesus, recognizes; Truth, the blended majesty and sweetness of whose appeal, as there embodied, the soul resists only to own itself conquered at last; Truth, which the great heart of humanity is sobbing for, though in its ignorance it knows it not; Truth, at one with Nature, at one with the human consciousness, at one with the holiest convictions and aspirations of the soul, at one with "*every* word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God"; Truth, that answers the world's hope, that has led on the world's advance, that bears the secret of the world's redemption; around whose uplifted One the world is gathering, through an attraction more potent than the spheres obey—the attraction of a Heavenly Goodness and a self-sacrificing love; yea, gathering in faith, in reverence, in gratitude, in unity. Yes, the church shall be one—in and through him, one; he more than its Head—its Heart. Differences may still exist, and be strongly held; but no more to divide or alienate, no more to turn aside or obstruct or limit the flow, from each to each, of a fraternal sympathy and good-will. "The multitude of them that believe" shall be again "of one heart and one soul," loving and serving one another and the Father, in the spirit of His Son.

Into this fold of the One Church we introduce, to-day, a new laborer; bearing from other fields a pledge, if there needed any but himself, of his fidelity in this. My brother—though another's province in these services to speak the words of sympathy and welcome, I would fain give voice to that "God-speed," which, in an interest and affection only

less than paternal, my heart is bidding you; and to *that* which, I feel, another heart and a nearer, is breathing for you with a fullness of joy and benediction which only the ascended know; yea more, and to *that* which, be sure, all the good and faithful there—saints of our own communion and of all communions—one now—in heart are offering you; there, where Faith has become sight, and Hope fruition, and Charity, greater than they—sweet Charity—all-including, all-crowning Love—abides.